

Sport Fans' Response to Rival Team Athlete's Transgression: Focusing on Moral Reasoning Strategies

Jinwoo Ahn, *University of Florida*
Elliot Evangelista, *University of Florida*
Joon Sung Lee, *University of Florida*

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25-minute oral presentation
(including questions)

Introduction

Sport fans are exposed to many athlete transgressions in their daily lives (e.g., Ezekiel Elliott, Jameis Winston, Lionel Messi). Although it might seem easy to not support someone after a wrong doing, sport fans go through complex moral reasoning strategies when they are highly identified with a transgression committer (Lee et al., 2016). Transgressions in sport are a catalyst for a decision to be made by sport fans identified with a team going through a scandal of whether or not to still support a player after the transgression occurs (Chien et al., 2016; Lee & Kwak, 2016; Lee et al., 2016). The decisions and behaviors of rival fans of the team who has a transgression-committing athlete, however, are unclear. A line of research has found sport fans show more negatively skewed responses (e.g., pleasure when a rival team loses, celebrating injuries of a rival team) to out-group members' (rival teams') failure or misfortune (i.e., schadenfreude; Dalakas & Melancon, 2012; Hoogland et al., 2014). However, to our best knowledge, no previous research has examined highly identified sport fans' responses to a rival team athlete's transgression. Thus, this study aims to examine how highly identified fans respond to a rival team athlete's scandal by taking different moral reasoning strategies.

Theoretical Background and Research Hypotheses.

With scandal not being a factor, fans that already socially identify themselves with one team tend to have positive feelings from the misfortunes of their opponents (Dalakas & Melancon, 2012; Hoogland et al., 2014). In fact, fans are prone to perform negative behaviors such as trash-talk and even physical harm to their rivals (Dalakas & Melancon, 2012; Hoogland et al., 2014; Cikara, Botvinick, & Fiske, 2011; Marticotte et al., 2016). This information is important and applies to this study because athlete scandals often cause misfortune for the stakeholders of the team that the athlete plays for. In light of these, scandals for one team could potentially cause more severe responses from its rival team's fans enabling them to enjoy positive feelings (e.g., pleasure; Dalakas & Melancon, 2012).

Scandal can be a tricky thing to morally reason for a sport fan. There are three different moral reasoning strategies; moral decoupling (separating the judgment of morality from the judgment of performance), moral rationalization (justifying the actions of the wrongdoer), and moral coupling (combining the judgment of morality and judgment of performance) (Bhattacharjee et al., 2013; Lee & Kwak, 2016). For this study, moral coupling will be an important moral reasoning strategy to consider. It is known that social identification with a team plays an important role in how one perceives a team over its rivals (Hoogland et al., 2014). Since fans who identify with a team receive satisfaction or motivation to harm a rival team based just on the rival team's performance on the field, a transgression could create more negative reactions. With this combination of the judgment of performance on the field and judgment of morality of a transgression-committing athlete, the moral coupling strategy is being used.

Thus, the current study proposes as below.

H1. Highly identified fans will be more likely to use moral coupling strategy than moral decoupling or rationalization when responding to the rival team athlete's transgression.

Moreover, based on Lee and others' (2016) findings that highly identified fans tend to show steadfast supports to their favorite athlete by taking either moral decoupling or rationalization, we propose as below.

H2. Highly identified fans will be more likely to use moral decoupling and rationalization than moral coupling when

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responding to their favorite team athlete's transgression.

Method.

By following Bhattacharjee and others' (2013) content analysis with slight modifications, we will examine fans' comments responding to news articles dealing with the same athlete transgression released by local newspapers which have been rooted in the geographical areas of two teams: a team the transgressed athlete plays for and the team's rival. Online newspapers will be examined 14 days after the incident occurred will be examined. The reason for this is to track how and why behavior changes towards the transgression committer from both fan bases. The comments on the news articles will be measured on the degree of separation of judgments of performance and judgments of morality (i.e., moral decoupling), the degree of justifying the wrong doing (i.e., moral rationalization), and the degree of integration of judgments of performance and judgments of morality (i.e., moral coupling) (Bhattacharjee et al., 2013). The strategies will be measured on a 7-point scale (1 = none, 7 = very present). With the information collected, we can determine what strategies the two fan bases use to morally reason a transgression committed by an athlete.

Expected Results and Discussion.

Based on the previous literature, it is expected that the hypotheses will be confirmed. Highly identified fans will be more likely to use the moral coupling strategy when responding to the rival team athlete's transgression and highly identified fans will be more likely to use moral decoupling or rationalization when responding to the favorite team athlete's transgression.

This research will contribute to literature and sport management professionals in multiple ways. It will contribute to literature because it is the first research of its kind. Other researchers can build upon the results of this study and dig deeper into the effects that transgressions can have on different bases and why transgressions can cause those respective effects. Team management can use these findings to be prepared for what is to come if/when one of their players commits a transgression. Additionally, sport agents can present the findings to their athletes so that they understand more about the consequences that could potentially come from their rival fan base if they commit a transgression. More detailed implications will be discussed during the presentation.